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Game creators join war against terrorism

By Greg Wright, Gannett News Service

Wanted: Fun-loving, patriotic person willing to create and play video games all day while helping America fight terrorism. Sound like the perfect job? Well, it exists at the Naval Postgraduate School's Modeling, Virtual Environments and Simulation (MOVES) Institute in sunny Monterey, Calif. Twenty-five former commercial video game designers are working with Navy students at the institute to create video game-like simulations to train troops to fight terrorism.

SimCity.com
Some of the training games MOVES creates look similar to Electronic Arts' popular 'SimCity' game.

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The terrorist simulations, which are still about three years away from release, would use artificial intelligence to predict how terrorists might wreak havoc on civilians or U.S. troops.

Although Osama bin Laden might be history by the time the terrorist training games are complete, MOVES officials said they are still needed because terrorism will persist.

"If you think the war is going to be over next year, you are mistaken," said MOVES Institute director Michael Zyda, who turned 47 on Sept. 11. "This may take a generation."

Game designers as teachers

Many MOVES instructors used to work at Sony, Electronic Arts and other top video game makers. MOVES Institute also partners with other big

players such as Lucas Film, the studio behind the *Star Wars* films, Dolby Interactive and Epic Games.

Some of the training games MOVES creates look similar to Electronic Arts' popular *SimCity*, which lets computer users create their own virtual city complete with luxury condos, parks, tax-paying citizens and crime. Others are simply just red and blue dots playing across a computer screen grid.

The military has used computer simulation for flight and combat training for decades. But the new war against Osama bin Laden and worldwide terrorism is making many of these combat models obsolete, Zyda said.

The military now has to plan attacks against small, fanatical terrorist cells not large armies   and the battlefield has moved to formerly safe places like airports.

"If you look at the focus of the U.S. military, it has been the Cold War with the Russians coming in," Zyda said. "Now, the military has been making some moves toward being more agile."

Artificial intelligence key

How do you make a computer game more agile and able to predict the mind of a terrorist? By giving the virtual characters more artificial intelligence, Zyda said.

For instance, MOVES is working on simulations that let designers create game characters with unique personalities and skills and play them off other characters. Such a program would be ideal for simulating how an individual terrorist or terrorist cell might react in an urban setting or when attacking U.S. forces.

Some defense experts criticized the U.S. Military for relying too much on technology before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Ground-based intelligence could have yielded more clues the attack was imminent, critics said.

But Jack Spencer, defense analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., said simulations such as MOVES computer games are invaluable as long as they are combined with reality-based anti-terrorism training.

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